Christian Aspects in *Titus Andronicus*

川　浪　亜弥子
Ayako KAWANAMI

Introduction

Titus Andronicus, which is one of Shakespeare's tragedies written at an earlier stage in his career, is a Roman play with its story unfolded in a political milieu of the Roman Empire. The play begins with the triumphal march of the illustrious general Titus Andronicus paraded through the Roman streets with his war prisoners, the Goths. He is earnestly recommended taking the honourable title of emperor in front of the applauding public. In spite of this, he firmly refuses to accept the offer because of his feeble and aged condition. He proposes Saturninus, the eldest son of the recently deceased emperor, as the true successor of the imperial crown, instead of himself, thereby supporting the right of primogeniture. The nominated emperor Saturninus decides to take Tamora, the queen of the Goths, as his wife, which is to bring the civilized country of Rome straight into chaos and decay. The vengeful intrigue of Tamora and her secret love Aaron, a black Moor, falls upon the family of Andronici in such a way that Titus's sons are killed one by one and his dear daughter Lavinia is raped by Tamora's sons. At the end of the play, his only remaining son Lucius, who has been banished from Rome by Saturninus, takes up arms of the good Goths to restore order in Rome. *Titus Andronicus* is historically unspecific and politically eclectic unlike Shakespeare's other Roman plays such as *Julius Caesar, Coriolanus*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*,[1] but it is a play absolutely redolent with Roman values.

In such a Roman context, nevertheless, there appear anachronistic references to the movement of the Reformation in sixteenth century England. After Lucius takes his army into Rome towards the end of the play, one of the good Goths strayed from his troops "gaze[s] upon a ruinous monastery."[2] The newly returned Lucius is described by Aaron as a person who carefully observes "twenty popish tricks and ceremonies" (5. 1. 76).

What is the Roman Lucius doing, observing "popish tricks and ceremonies" of the strange religion of Christianity? What is the pagan Goth doing there, gazing upon the ruins of an old Christian building? This paper is going to examine the meanings of the apparently incompatible Christian references in this Roman play.

I "A ruinous monastery"

One of the visibly dire consequences of Henry VIII's separation from Rome is the thorough dissolution of monasteries and other religious buildings and monuments. For example, William Lambarde, the first great chorographer in Elizabethan England, describes the monastic ruins at

Canterbury as follows:

> And therefore, no marvaile, if wealth withdrawn, and opynion of holynesse remooved, the places tumble headlong to ruine and decay.
>
> In which part, as I cannot on the one side, but in respect of the places themselves pitie and lament this generall decay ... So on the other side, considering the maine Seas of sinne and iniquitie, wherein the worlde (at those daies) was almost wholy drenched, I must needes take cause, highly to praise God that hath thus mercifully in our age delivered us, disclosed Satan, unmasked these Idoles, dissolved their Synagogs, and raced to the grounde all monuments of building erected to superstition and ungodlynesse.[3]

William Lambarde was a professed Protestant who enthusiastically blamed Catholic doctrines and customs for being ungodly, superstitious, and idolatrous. Having said that, the iconoclastic impact on the contemporary society was such that even ardent Protestants like Lambarde themselves deeply felt pity and lament for ruinous scenes.

Whether Catholic or Protestant, William Shakespeare also shared the general mood of lament and pity for monastic dissolutions in the period of the Reformation. An abrupt reference to the religious ruins in Sonnet 73 can be read in a Reformation context:

> That time of year thou mayst in me behold
> When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
> Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
> Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

The poet compares his aged condition to desolate Catholic remains, thereby evoking nostalgic feelings for the happy golden age where plants grow vigorously and birds sing sweetly.

Eamon Duffy argues that "the material ruins of the monastic and Catholic past became emblematic not only of the condition of the Catholic community but of the calamities which the Reformation had brought on England itself, not only in the destruction of right doctrine and religious practice but in the overthrow of charity, social defence and roots of community."[4] The representation of nostalgia for the lost social values which used to be the core of society with the images of songs and decay can be found in Marcus's description of the raped Lavinia:

> O, that delightful engine of her thoughts,
> That blabbed them with such pleasing eloquence,
> Is torn from forth that pretty hollow cage
> Where, like a sweet melodious bird, it sung
> Sweet varied notes, enchanting every ear. (3.1. 83-7)

After Lavinia is raped and cut off her hands and her tongue, Titus is also deceived into losing his hand. He describes his mutilated body as a ruin: "O here, I lift this one hand up to heaven/And bow this feeble ruin to the earth" (3.1. 207-8). Through the same association the mutilated Lavinia is ruins. The mutilation of Lavinia implies not only the decline of the state of Rome as is shown by the

repetitious overlapping of the body of human beings and that of the state,[5] but also squares itself with a Reformation context. This supposition is strengthened by the fact that Lucius expresses her sister's mutilation with the word "martyr;" "Speak, gentle sister: who hath martyred thee" (3.1. 82) ?

II "Martyr"

The Goths' flowing into the civilised culture of the Roman Empire in *Titus Andronicus* makes its traditional practices and habits look barbarous. The opposition between the Romans and the Goths might be considered in terms of the violent clash of Roman Catholic and Protestant.[6] For one thing, some references to Roman customary practices are religious, for that matter, quite Catholic; for another thing, there is always an association between the Goths and the Germanic. Furthermore, when Lucius returns to Rome, taking the good Goths with him, in order to put the state of Rome right, slight knowledge of the namesake of Lucius serves to establish the interpretation of the opposition of the Romans and the Goths as Catholicism versus Protestantism. According to John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* (1563), Lucius is said to be a bringer of Christian faith and a respectable king who put an end to the period under invaders' reign: "this kingdom of Britane, whiche endured from Brutus to Cadwalader, 2076 years under an hundredth & ii. Kings, at length reccaved the Christian faith An. Clxii. in the name Lucius their king."[7] However, the patient attention to the use of the word "martyr" throughout the play can make it impossible to interpret the clash of these two tribes from the viewpoint of such a binary opposition.

Titus Andronicus is full of acts of physical mutilation. One mutilation triggers another mutilation; it is a bloody spiral of mutilating actions. The act of mutilation is very often described with the word "martyr" which, according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, signifies "inflict grievous suffering or pain" (v. 2) or "mutilate" (v. 4). At the same time, the word "martyr" would have had a special reverberation for the people in Elizabethan England, since it is the key word of John Fox's *Acts and Monuments*, also known as *The Book of Martyrs*, a book written from a Protestant point of view about Christian church history and martyrology. In *Titus Andronicus*, however, the word "martyr" has been applied to the mutilation of the Goths as well as the Romans like Lavinia and Titus.

The spiral of mutilating acts begins with the treatment of the prisoner Alarbus, a son of Tamora, the queen of the Goths:

> Lucius　Away with him, and make a fire straight,
> And with our swords upon a pile of wood
> Let's hew his limbs till they be clean consumed.
> Tamora　O cruel, irreligious piety!
> Chiron　Was never Scythia half so barbarous!
> . . . . . .
> Lucius　See, lord and father, how we have performed
> Our Roman rites: Alarbus' limbs are lopped
> And entrails feed the sacrificing fire,
> Whose smoke like incense doth perfume the sky. (1.1. 130-48)

Lucius's cruel act of hewing and lopping Alarbus's limbs and sacrificing his entrails at the altar of a

fire is nothing but the act of mutilation, to use the contemporary word, "martyr." Lucius's way of sacrifice, in his words "Roman rites," is also a cogent reminder of Catholic rituals in which "incense" is one of the essential religious instruments for showing piety for the dead. But as Tamora terms it "irreligious piety," Lucius's act of sacrifice, no matter how pious it looks, is irreligious. And it is exactly the wording of Protestant polemicists. For Protestant polemicists as well as the Goths, perhaps, Alarbus can be a martyr.

All the same, Lucius's bloody sacrifice leads to the act of mutilation on the part of the Goths. As a retribution for Alarbus's death, Tamora lets her other sons Demetrius and Chiron rape and mutilate Lavinia. Looking at the raped and mutilated Lavinia, Titus's response is the words of agony: "Thou hast no hands to wipe away thy tears,/Nor tongue to tell me who hath martyred thee" (3.1. 107-8). Titus also undergoes the suffering of mutilation, hoodwinked by Aaron into losing his hand. In turn, the Romans become martyrs.

The next revenge is done by way of a cooperative work of Lavinia and Titus. It is their act of mutilating Chiron and Demetrius:

> Titus Hark, wretches, how I mean to martyr you:
> This one hand yet is left to cut your throats,
> Whiles that Lavinia 'tween her stumps doth hold
> The basin that receives your guilty blood.
> You know your mother means to feast with me,
> And calls herself Revenge and thinks me mad.
> Hark, villains, I will grind your bones to dust,
> And with your blood and it I'll make a paste,
> And of the paste a coffin I will rear,
> And bid that strumpet, your unhallowed dam,
> Like to the earth swallow her own increase.
> This is the feast that I have bid her to,
> And this the banquet she shall surfeit on: (5.2. 180-92)

At the Eucharistic feast of the Catholic ritual, wine and bread is miraculously changed into Christ's blood and flesh, and is eaten as stuff of eternal life. In a cannibalistic parody of this Catholic ritual, Tamora's sons' blood and flesh is swallowed into their mother's body and live there eternally. In this context, Tamora's sons are martyrs, sacrificed at the quasi-Catholic altar.

At the end of the play, Lucius apparently restores order and puts an end to this spiral of mutilation. As far as Lucius is concerned, he seems to bear such responsibility through the imaginings of his very name. Yet his coping with Tamora at the very end of the play suggests another act of mutilation:

> As for that ravenous Tiger, Tamora,
> No funeral rite, nor man in mourning weed,
> No mournful bell shall ring her burial,
> But throw her forth to beasts and birds to prey: (5.3. 194-7)

Lucius may reflect upon establishing a new state of new Christian faith, standing at the scene where there are the monastic ruins, but his practice of burial is still irreligious.

Conclusion

Titus Andronicus is a revenge play in which bloody actions are exploited to the extreme limit of cruelty. The brutal acts of mutilation are always associated with Christian practice and "martyr." If you string together passing references to Christian practices, there appear bloody aspects of both Catholic and Protestant. What I would like to emphasise in this paper is not that *Titus Andronicus* is a play about religious conflict in the period of the Reformation in the guise of a Roman play, but that the play is at least a reflection of contemporary concern. It is not also my contention to decide which religious sect Shakespeare is sympathetic to, whether Catholic or Protestant. The question remains open, while cruel aspects of martyrdom are endlessly probed in a darker key.

Notes

[1] In his discussion of the sources of *Titus Andronicus*, G. K. Hunter argues, "If it is a Roman play it is certainly a very different kind of Roman play from these Plutarchan models. Its 'history' is impossible to locate in time, and its actions demand an extreme range of contradictory responses." See G. K. Hunter, "Sources and Meaning in *Titus Andronicus*" in J. C. Gray ed., *Mirror up to Shakespeare: Essays in Honour of G. B. Hibbard* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), pp. 171-88, esp. p. 181.

[2] William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, The Arden Shakespeare, ed. by Jonathan Bate (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), Act 5, Scene 1, 21. All the references to this work are to this edition, hereafter cited with act, scene, and line numbers in the text.

[3] William Lambarde, *A Perambulation of Kent*, cited in Eamon Duffy, "Bare Ruined Choirs: Remembering Catholicism in Shakespeare's England" in Richard Dutton, Alison Findlay, and Richard Wilson eds., *Theatre and Religion: Lancastrian Shakespeare* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 40-57, esp. pp. 41-2.

[4] Eamon Duffy, p. 48.

[5] For example, when newly electing the emperor, Marcus says to Titus, "Be *candidatus* then and put it on,/and help to set a head on headless Rome" (1.1. 188-9).

[6] What follows is indebted to Jonathan Bate's account of the Reformation context in *Titus Andronicus* in the introduction of his edition. See pp. 18-21.

[7] John Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* (1563), Book 1, p. 32 from John Foxe's The Acts and Monuments Online, retrieved from http://www.johnfoxe.org/1563 (November 19, 2011).